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Linguistic Preponderancy and Hegemony: A Critical Examination of the Turgid and Discursive Strategies of Dominance in Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* (1957)

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Abstract:

Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* is a play that adroitly and ingeniously scrutinizes the power dynamics of language promulgating how verbal juggling and subterfuge can be used as a tool for control, repression, ascendancy and even violence. This paper will ferret out the ways Pinter employs language to create a convoluted web of power relationships among the characters, catechizing how language shapes their interactions, identities and ultimately their fate. The following citation from the renowned book of Andrew Sanders titled *The Short Oxford History of English Literature* validates this point: “In *The Birthday Party* language, is seen as the means by which power can be exercised and as something that can be defined and manipulated to suit the ends of those who actually hold power.” By unweaving the esoteric and laminated dialogues, this paper will seek to unravel the ways in which language is brought into play as a contrivance of authority and submission. Pinter's corpus is characterised by its cryptic and repeatedly opaque verbal interchanges, offers a rich effigy for examining the confluence of power, language and psychological servitude. The play synopsisizes and epitomizes a microcosm of linguistic struggle where every dictum, every pause and every silence is punctiliously calculated to magnify the

power dynamics among the characters. The verbal tactics of characters, marked by prevaricating language, rhetorical ensnarement and at the same time overwhelming pleonasm are not just demotic and communicative strategies but premeditated acts of psychological warfare. The play thus operates on various levels with language functioning as both a weapon and shield. By exploring the linguistic convolutions, this paper will delve into the deeper implications of the playwright's work revealing how language in the play is not merely a medium of exchange but a powerful force that constructs, deconstructs and eventually controls the reality of the characters. The textual and discourse analysis of the play will accentuate and underscore Pinter's anatomization of the dark prospects of language which reflects extensive leitmotif of social control, psychological manipulation and the flimsiness of human communication. This paper delves into the ticklish mechanism of linguistic preponderancy which is quite evident in the aforementioned play.

Keywords: Rhetorical Entrapments, Obfuscation, Semantic Manipulation, Linguistic Tactics, Imbroglios.

Harold Pinter, a colossus of twentieth century drama is illustrious for his elliptical and arcane use of language where the spoken word often carries a load far greater than its surface meaning. He was an English playwright who procured a global reputation as one of the most heterogeneous and challenging post World-War IInd dramaturgists. His plays are noted for their use of restraint, subtlety, small talk, non sequiturs and even silence. He won the Nobel Prize for literature in 2005. The dialogic structure which is punctuated by pauses and silences, epitomizes what has come to be known as Pinteresque language - a paraphernalia of control that transcends mere conversation. Andrew Sanders in his book entitled *The Short Oxford History of English Literature* says that: "all



Pinter's plays suggest a sure sense of the dramatic effect of pacing, pausing and timing." His plays are ordinary, simple, yet charismatic and mysterious. The Birthday Party is a very popular play of Pinter and it is his full length play. This play is no doubt very complex and confusing. The events take place in a very peculiar manner and the characters act in an inconceivably mysterious way, sharing a completely wacky and daft dialogue among them. The language becomes slippery and deceptive implies more or less an artifice used to avoid something objectionable, embarrassing and disgusting. It makes no perceptible and discernible sense here in this play as the language used by Pinter only puzzles the reader. The playwright provides very little information about the background and motives of his characters here in this play. We can not be certain about anything happening in the play because this play echoes the reality of the postmodern world where nothing is guaranteed and full of chaotic absurdity. The Theatre of the Absurd is a theatrical movement that emerged in the mid twentieth century, distinguished by plays that spurn logical narrative structures and espoused the absurdity of human existence. Absurdist playwrights, such as Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco and Harold Pinter tried to impart the meaninglessness, pandemonium and entropy of modern life through illogical, shattered and often ludicrous dialogue and situations. In absurdist plays characters struggle to discover purpose and connection in an ostensibly insensible world.

Language is more often used in unusual and uncustomary ways, and the distinction between reality and illusion is misty and hazy. The Theatre of the Absurd disagrees with the traditional norms of drama and storytelling instead welcoming the absurd, the nonlinear, the incomprehensible, the irrational and the unknown. Through this distinctive approach absurdist playwrights call attention to the absurdity of human existence. When first appeared on the stage these plays stunned and shocked their audiences as they were indescribably different from anything

that had been formerly staged. In fact many of them were categorized as anti-plays. In an endeavour to explicate and expound this radical movement Martin Esslin coined the term “The Theatre of the Absurd” in his 1960 book of the aforementioned name. He defined it as such, because all of the plays accentuated the absurdity of the human condition. Intrinsically each play furnishes and portrays man’s existence as preposterous and unfathomable. This idea was a reaction to the subsidence of ethical, spiritual, political and social structures trailing and tracking the two World-Wars of the twentieth century. One important aspect of the play is the lack of communication, the characters resort to silence and pause. Ostensibly, these silences and pauses break in their speaking . But the playwright has a definite strategy in using these linguistic and verbal tactics. With the help of the labyrinthine form of communication, the characters communicate what cannot be communicated through words.

Pinter’s language has been so off-beat, so diverse and so unique that it has attracted almost each and every critic of his plays. In the play language is exercised as a weapon, used to dominate, browbeat, intimidate and unnerve others. The character of Goldberg, in particular evinces this employing semasiological and onomasiological (linguistic) tactics to asseverate his power over the other characters through his use of rhetorical questions, undulating reasoning and semantic command. Goldberg wields control creating a sense of uncertainty and confusion. The dramaturgist explores how language shapes identity particularly in the character of Stanley. Stanley’s language is marked by incoherence, fracture, paroxysm, convulsion, spasm, twinge, tergiversation, prevarication, obliqueness and equivocation reflecting his flimsy and splintering sense of self. On the contrary Goldberg’s language is characterised by self-assuredness, domineeringness and clarity, solidifying his authoritative position. Goldberg, as an illustration, often speaks in long sinuous and fractious sentences that seem to circle around the point without



ever making it crystal clear. This strategy not only confuses Stanley but also confirms Goldberg's dominance by creating an atmosphere where meaning is intangible and control is employed through the power of language itself. McCann, on the contrary, uses a more direct yet equally brutal form of speech, characterised by repetition and avowal, which works to break down Stanley's opposition. Through his reconnaissance and reconnoitering of language Pinter sheds light on the multifarious web of power relationships that govern human interaction, highlighting the fragility of identity and the cataclysmic consequences of linguistic operation.

Silence too plays a requisite role in the power dynamics of language in the play. Pinter uses silence to convey intransigence, contumacy and even power. They are not dead-stops in the communicative route among his characters but an apparatus to communicate something that cannot be articulated through words. As he has said of his characters : "It is in the silence that they are most evident to me." The noteworthy citation from the book titled *History of English Literature* authored by Edward Albert approves this point: "Harold Pinter conveys the rambling ambiguities and silences of everyday conversation with an amazing authenticity that is obviously much influenced by Beckett, and uses them to build up the sense of menace and scarcely restrained violence." Meg's silence for instance serves as a form of recalcitrance against Goldberg's verbal onslaught, while Stanley's silence connotes his submission to the peremptory forces surrounding him. Pinter's purposeful and intentional positioning of pauses and silences further dilates the power dynamics at play as these movements are permeated(charged) with unspoken threats and the edginess of unsettled conflict. Stanley's silence, whether imposed or voluntary, becomes a form of quiescent and inert resistance, though ultimately it is incorporated by the antagonists as yet another instrument of control. The handling of both speech and silence in the play thus reveals a broader interpretation on the nature of power, how it is asseverated, maintained and resisted. The

play's tactical use of silence further compounds this dynamic, giving prominence to how power can be put in action through both the presence and absence of speech.

The characters, particularly Goldberg and McCann utilize a knotty and unfathomable form of communication where their enigmatic and nodular speech patterns serve as a psychological vilification and belabouring on Stanley, stripping him of agency and destabilising his perception of the world. Their speech saturated with abstruseness and deliberate obfuscation operates as a contrivance of psychological subjugation, trapping Stanley in a web of confusion and fear. The play paints how language when wielded as a tool of domination can obscure truth, dismantle reality and cause the individual to become powerless. Pinter's masterful use of both straightforward and roundabout forms of communication serves as a sturdy reminder of the capacity and knack for language to function as a device of both connection and control, reflecting the intricacies and imbrolios of human social dynamics. The playwright demonstrates how language can be weaponized to destabilize an individual sense of self and reality.

It is believed that understanding Pinter's plays is strongly associated with his use of language. This feature is quite perceptible in *The Birthday Party*, Pinter's first full-length play, which was first performed at The Arts Theatre in Cambridge on 28, April, 1958. A three-Act play in which the characters are multifaceted, for we cannot recognize why Stanley Webber, a young man in his thirties is camouflaging from the world. His only refuge is Meg, an elderly woman, sixty-years old, who treats him as a son and at the same time as a lover. Readers as well as spectators do not comprehend why the Jewish, Goldberg and the Irish McCann have taken him away from Meg. In the third Act Pinter cajoles us to witness the incoherent speech of Stanley when McCann and Goldberg had determined to take him away. He remains static, frightened and is subjected to a flow of language. Stanley is governed by the rapidity of mysterious talks of the two intruders. This



impenetrable and nonsensical speech, drenched him out of self which is apparent in the following lines:

MCCAN. That's it.

GOLDBERG. We'll make a man of you.

MCCANN. And a woman.

GOLDBERG. You'll be re-oriented.

MCCANN. You'll be rich.

GOLDBERG. You'll be adjusted.

MCCANN. You'll be our pride and joy.

GOLDBERG. You'll be a mensch.

MCCANN. You'll be a success.

GOLDBERG. You'll be integrated.

MCCANN. You'll give orders.

GOLDBERG. You'll make decisions. (Pinter 83-84)

Being aware of the potential power of language, Goldberg and McCann use linguistic techniques making their utterances stronger and more effectively forceful. In fact, they are the ones who are giving orders and building decisions, distorting Stanley by their offensive language. It would easily be noticed that there is more effective rhythm in Goldberg and McCann's language in Act three, than in the previous Acts. It is more interesting to see the possession and power of language that disassemble not only Stanley who emerges to be the principal victim in the play, but also Petey, Meg's husband. He has tried to defend Stanley, but proves to be weak and easily declines. The following citation from the text confirms and validate this point:

PETHEY. Where are you taking him?

(They turn. Silence.)

GOLDBERG. We're taking him to Monty.

PPETHEY. He can stay here.

GOLDBERG. Don't be silly.

PETHEY. We can look after him here.

GOLDBERG. Why do you want to look after him?

PETHEY. He's my guest.

GOLDBERG. He needs special treatment.

PETHEY. We'll find someone.

GOLDBERG. No. Monty's the best there is. Bring him, McCann.

(They help Stanley out of the chair. They all three move towards the door, left)

PETHEY Leave him alone!

(They stop. Goldberg studies him)

GOLDBERG *(insidiously)*. Why don't you come with us, Mr. Boles? (Pinter 85)

We can realize that Petey really lacks words to comment upon the invitation he has been offered. Like Stanley he is ineffectual to budge and communicate. And the play ends, as it starts, with Meg and Petey alone in the room. It is therefore very justifiable and quite rational to refer to Pinter as a 'dramatist of power'. Pinter has used that technique whereby the characters use language as a weapon or instrument of power so as to defeat their partners. This task appears beyond the reach in this play because of the uncertainty and vagueness that is maintained between the characters.



Stanley's verbal expression is more indirect, more jerky and almost completely clandestine. It is an often repeated feature in almost the entire play. This is to point out that the purpose of most of the characters of the play is to mislead each other and build up their superiority. Sometimes the readers are faced with conspicuous ingredients of the play which brings the play under the category of the theatre of the absurd- circuitous and convoluted speech, and meaninglessness of human existence which is entirely ridiculous and absurd that it prolongs suspense.

GOLDBERG. When did you last wash up a cup?

STANLEY. The Christmas before last.

GOLDBERG. Where?

STANLEY. Lyons Corner House.

GOLDBERG. Which one?

STANLEY. Marble Arch.

GOLDBERG. Where was your wife?

STANLEY. In-

GOLDBERG. Answer.

STANLEY. (*turning, crouched*). What wife?

GOLDBERG. What have you done with your wife?

MCCANN. He's killed his wife!

GOLDBERG. Why did you kill your wife?

STANLEY. (*sitting, his back to the audience*). What wife?

MCCANN. How did he kill her?

GOLDBERG. How did you kill her?

MCCANN. You throttled her.

GOLDBERG. With arsenic.

MCCANN. There's your man! (Pinter 49)

What is stressed throughout is that language is an intervening factor in the exercise of power. Goldberg and McCann's unavoidable threat, violence and nuisance are true representations of reality of power featured through different instances in the play. Thus language is no more a language, i.e. it is not a style to exchange a few words with others; it is a mask to veil our real self, it is a pretense to keep things together, it is a means to trap others by using it as a literalism. This is what Pinter really picked up from our blatant life and through it back on us. Pinter's dealing of language and the world around him is interpenetrating and inseparable. Pinter knows very well that we hide instead of enlightening, through language. He stated: "You and I, the characters which grow on a page, most of the time we're expressionless, giving little away, unpredictable, indescribable, elusive, disruptive, unwilling, but it is out of these attributes that a language arises." Since the playwright considers language to be untrustworthy; that is why he shows greater confidence in silence through which we actually communicate in the difficulty of our lives. It can, therefore, be safely proclaimed that by demonstrating language as tactic in the play titled *The Birthday Party* Pinter goes down into the heart of his characters who are inconsistent, paralytic and egocentric and by doing so he very successfully highlights the debacle of modern man, who is too weak to reveal his true feelings and in order to keep his kettle boiling, he becomes ostentatious, hypocrite and vicious in his words what he utters. In the words of Andrew Sanders : "both characters threaten, and finally break, the inarticulate Stanley with a monstrous, staccato



barrage of unanswerable questions and half-associated ideas.” Some lines of the text are worthy of citation here to conceptualize and theorize the above mentioned statement:

GOLDBERG. You need a long convalescence.

MCCANN. A change of air.

GOLDBERG. Somewhere over the rainbow.

MCCANN. Where angels fear to tread.

GOLDBERG. Exactly.

MCCANN. You’re in a rut.

GOLDBERG. You look anaemic.

MCCANN. Rheumatic.

GOLDBERG. Myopic.

MCCANN. Epileptic.

GOLDBERG. You’re on the verge.

MCCANN. You’re a dead duck.

GOLDBERG. But we can save you.

MCCANN. From a worse fate.

GOLDBERG. True.

MCCANN. Undeniable.

GOLDBERG. From now on, we’ll be the hub of your wheel. (Pinter 82)

In a nutshell Pinter’s characters, specifically the antagonists Goldberg and McCann represent linguistic preponderancy through their strategic deployment of circumlocutory and

prolix language. Their speech is replete with convoluted syntax, puzzling references and rhetorical questions, all designed to overwhelm and befuddle their stooge and sufferer, Stanley. In the play language is not solely a medium for transmitting information; it is a tool or utensil of power. The discursive strategies employed by the characters of the play reveal an entrenched paramountcy and leverage that operates beneath the surface of their interactions. Goldberg and McCann's probing and questioning of Stanley, for example, is not a quest for truth but a performance of incarceration and confinement. Their questions are loaded, their accusations amorphous and their language turgid. This creates a tortuous and meandering environment where Stanley is rendered powerless unable to defend himself against the onslaught of words that bear down on him. The weight and force of language in this absurd play of Pinter, is thus not just about who speaks but about how speech is used to pronounce control over another's reality. While much of the play's friction and discord is derived from the tumid exchanges between characters, playwright use of language is equally pivotal and climactic. Silence, in dramaturge's hands, becomes a form of linguistic supremacy-a way to exert control by restraining language. For Stanley, the silence imposed upon him by Goldberg and McCann is as stifling as their speech, signifying his complete vassalage. The hegemony of silence therefore, operates alongside the verbal prepollency to create a broad system of control within the play. Through the play's turgid and discursive strategies Pinter exposes the ways in which language can be manipulated to subjugate and control. Michael Alexander in his magnum opus work titled *A History of English Literature* proclaims about Harold Pinter's use of language: "his verbal surface has peeling realistic veneer, each character being identified by a memorable trick of speech; but the characters' relation to what is ordinarily taken as a real life is tenuous and oblique."



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